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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000709

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ATTACKS ON SINIORA ESCALATE, BECOME
PERSONAL

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Attacks against Prime Minister Siniora, both in the press and in local conversations, have escalated and taken on a more personal tenor. These attacks, largely led by Hizballah, but with contributions from both Sunni and Shia individuals, have resurrected stories about Siniora and his father, and launched more current charges of corruption and political rifts. All media sources consider the intensity of the ongoing attacks as qualitatively different from previous criticism. End summary.

¶2. (C) During the last few weeks we have seen an increased level of attacks directed at Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, both in the press and via the ever-active Lebanese rumor mill. While the opposition has always criticized Siniora, in his role as the Prime Minister and leader of the majority's share in the cabinet, the current trend is different. The attacks are very personal, reaching back to vilify the PM's father, and are to some extent bipartisan. This change has been itself the subject of press commentary. As recently as eight days ago the March 14 forces issued a statement saying, "the campaign of false accusations which is targeting PM Siniora has reached a dangerous peak, . . . and threatens igniting the fire of sedition."

¶3. (C) Hizballah, largely through its television station Al Manar, has certainly led the pack. Following a press conference held by Siniora to review the progress in reconstruction and payment of reparations, Al Manar ran several reports lashing out at the PM. Beginning with its political commentary, Al Manar ridiculed Siniora, criticized the accuracy of his remarks, and repeated derogatory remarks about the Lebanese and the southern suburbs, which they attributed to Siniora. Al Manar also reported that Siniora accused residents of the southern suburbs and other Hizballah regions of "encroaching on common property." This was followed up by a program specifically targeting Siniora and his (deceased) father who, according to the program, were themselves guilty of "encroaching" on common property in the southern suburbs. They added that with regard to other property encroachments elsewhere, this particular incident was "only a drop" of what Siniora had taken for himself.

¶4. (C) The property story was picked up by other media outlets after the series of attacks in Al Manar. Pro-Lahoud Al-Bayraq newspaper related a comment by Speaker Berri scoffing at Siniora's lack of generosity. An-Nahar reported, "This escalating campaign against Siniora might aim at getting Siniora to give assistance money to Hizballah".

Private, independent Future TV ran a report on a meeting between MP Saad Hariri and the Mufti of Mount Lebanon (Sunni), where the Mufti called on Hizballah to "change its methods and manners" and to refrain from "lies and false accusations." The PM's media office issued a statement countering the accusations, saying that the story about the PM and his father was "fabricated lies." Most media outlets appear to believe that the attack targeting Siniora in particular is intended to mobilize the street and escalate political tensions. The goal appears to be to ensure that Siniora can never serve as prime minister again. Echoing that thought, editorialist Khodr Taleb in As-Safir tried to link the attacks on Siniora to a breach between the PM and Saad Hariri. This appeared to be an attempt to criticize the majority without alienating Hariri. In addition, there was some attempt to find an excuse for a weakening of the opposition. The "resigned" ministers have gone back to their offices to run their ministries, and a personal attack on Siniora suggests that the ministers felt obliged to defend the people and their ministries against him.

15. (C) In addition to attacks by Hizballah there have been additional criticisms leveled at Siniora by both Sunni and Shia sources. Sunni Islamic scholar Fathi Yakan referred to Siniora's letter to the UN Security Council regarding the tribunal as an "historical insult for the Sunni community in Lebanon" as a part of a virulent attack. MP Ali Bazzi, a member of the Amal movement, accused Siniora of isolating the Shia community. New TV, in reporting on the launch of new ADSL services in Lebanon, pointed out that the launch had been delayed to allow Marwan Hamadeh's son to prepare his company to handle that business. New TV then added that this act of corruption was blessed and supported by the PM, as evidenced by his presence at the press conference.

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16. (C) Comment: As prime minister of a country in the midst of turmoil and with an aggressive opposition movement, Siniora will always be subject to criticism. However, this has become particularly virulent, personal and ugly, and is generally regarded as a change in direction, to the point that we are as concerned as ever for Siniora's safety. Part of the campaign was aimed no doubt at an international audience: what better way to undermine the credibility of Siniora's letter to the UN Security Council asking for a "binding" decision on the tribunal than to discredit the sender? But, even though the letter has now been transmitted and circulated, there is no diminishment in the attacks against Siniora. Indeed, the fighting between Fatah al-Islam and the LAF in the north is proving new opportunities, as the pro-Syrian media and politicians pin blame on Siniora for gaps in LAF equipment and supplies. End comment.
FELTMAN